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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PRETORIA 001493

SIPDIS

STATE FOR OES/ETC, OES/STC, AF/S, AF/EPS
INTERIOR FOR FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
USDOC FOR 4510/ITA/MAC/AME/OA/DIEMOND

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TAGS: SENV SOCI ECON SF

SUBJECT: SOUTH AFRICAN PARKS OFFICIAL ON ELEPHANT CULLING
IN KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

REF: 04 PRETORIA 4950

(U) Classified by: Acting Economic Minister-Counselor
Alan Tousignant.
Reasons: 1.4 (d).

¶11. (C) Summary. The top conservation official at South African National Parks confirmed the accuracy of press reports on his recent, well-publicized statement on the necessity of culling in order to manage the elephant population in the Kruger National Park. He reached this conclusion based on the lack of other viable alternatives together with the need to protect biodiversity. He noted the increasingly important role that ethics and values (elephants vs. broader biodiversity) would play in the government's final policy decision. The official thinks that concerns about the negative impact that reintroducing culling would have on wildlife tourism and visitors to Kruger are overblown. He believes the Minister will avoid making a direct ruling on culling, for fear of being remembered only for the killing of elephants, and will instead maneuver to have the Cabinet or Parliament make a collective decision on this controversial and emotive issue. End summary.

Introduction

¶12. (U) EST Officer and EST Assistant met with South African National Parks (SANParks) Executive Director of Conservation Services, Hector Magome, on April 7 to discuss recent media reports on his blunt comments regarding the culling of elephants in the world-famous Kruger National Park (KNP), with a land mass the size of Massachusetts. Magome has extensive experience (19 years) as a wildlife biologist. He received his PhD from Colorado State University, with financial support from the African Wildlife Foundation. In mid-March, a journalist quoted Magome as saying We are strongly leaning towards culling and want the public to digest this hard fact. Magome confirmed to us that he was quoted correctly and provided some history and justification for his opinion.

History of Kruger elephants and culling

¶13. (U) Magome noted that culling had been introduced in Kruger National Park in the 1960s, around the same time that the first serious census of the Kruger elephant population was taken. He said at that time the experts established scientifically that a 7,000 elephant ceiling was the parks maximum capacity. For the next 25 years or so, KNP officials used culling to keep the elephant population steady at 7,000. Since the moratorium on culling was introduced in 1994, the KNP elephant population has grown to almost 12,000 today. Statistically, elephant populations tend to double every 10 to 13 years. This is roughly what has happened in Kruger since 1994. Elephants have no natural predators (man aside) and because their rugged digestive systems allow them to eat junk and just about anything they want, they fare well even in times of drought, when many other species suffer losses because unique food sources are scarce.

Alternatives to culling after 1994 insufficient

¶14. (SBU) As reftel noted, since 1994 KNP officials explored other options for dealing with the growing elephant population. The first is 'habitat expansion', largely supported by the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), which purchased property to increase land holdings in national parks. Magome said this option has been fully utilized, and further habitat expansion is not possible. He added that IFAW is critical of SANParks consideration of reintroducing culling and had submitted a thick anti-culling petition to him. He noted that the only agreement made with IFAW was that SANParks would not cull any elephants located on the new land that IFAW

purchased for elephants habitat expansion.

15. (SBU) A second mechanism, "translocation," is extremely resource- and time-intensive. Magome said the Peace Parks Foundation provided funding to move 1,000 elephants into Mozambique over three years, but the experienced elephant capture team at KNP has been able to move only 150 elephants, at a higher cost per elephant than PPF envisioned, approximately 5,000 Rands (approximately \$825) per head. About 30 of the elephants made their way back from Mozambique to KNP, via the small area where the border fence between the parks has come down (as part of the establishment of the Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Park). Magome confirmed recent press reports that some elephants have been observed moving from the South Africa side to the Mozambique side of the Park, but said the numbers were modest.

16. (SBU) Contraception, a third tool, has been tested with help from the Humane Society and can be used effectively in smaller parks, but is not feasible for KNP. Magome said that for contraception to work effectively, about 4,000 female elephants in KNP would have to be injected initially, followed by a booster shot a week later, and then monitored. In a park as big as KNP, the logistics of injecting and tracking so many elephants would affect the management and atmosphere of the park in unacceptable ways. Magome said such an effort would monopolize the time of all KNP staff to the exclusion of all else, and would change visitors experiences as well, by requiring the constant deployment of helicopters and four-wheel drive vehicles to follow the female elephants. He added that more research is necessary to understand the impact of contraception on elephant groups and family roles, as females inability to conceive could have negative consequences.

Balancing act: elephants vs. biodiversity

17. (SBU) Magome raised the issue of biodiversity and its importance in KNP. He said he accepted that SANParks and the SAG must be responsive to the animals rights groups and the broader public, but he noted that South Africa has a responsibility as a 'mega diverse' country to protect its biodiversity, and also had obligations under the Convention on Biological Diversity. This responsibility rests mainly with government policy makers, and he believes the current controversy hinges on ethics and value systems, and where to draw the line between protecting elephants and protecting other animal and plant species. SANParks role is to make recommendations for elephant management based on science, but not to make the policy decisions, which take into account political, economic and ethical concerns. As Reftel noted, the Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism will receive recommendations and is responsible for making the decision, anticipated later in the year. Magomes view is that culling is a necessary tool for elephant management in KNP. He does not advocate culling in isolation, but believes it is critical that it be an available option for wildlife managers.

Limited impact on tourism

18. (C) Magome said he would never publicly admit this because it would not play well in the media, but the argument on losing tourists (and by extension, commerce and jobs) due to culling was weak. In contrast to major game parks in other African countries that rely on foreign demand for wildlife tourism, he said the majority of visitors to KNP are from South Africa: 1 million out of the 1.2 million visitors last year were local residents. Most of the opposition to culling appears to be coming from international groups. He added that the decision to cull between the 1960s and 1994 did not have a notable impact on foreign tourists visiting Kruger, but he conceded that todays prevailing ethics could be different. Still, he does not believe that reintroducing culling would have a significant impact on the number of foreign tourists visiting KNP.

Next steps decision by the SA Government

19. (C) Magome stated that the Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Marthinus van Schalkwyk, would not directly approve the culling option. He said the Minister recently said in a meeting that he did not want to go down in history as the Minister who killed elephants, recalling a predecessor who, despite many positive achievements, is only remembered for allowing seals to be culled. Magome jokingly noted that the white brothers Afrikaners) would forever remember van Schalkwyk as the politician who killed the NNP New

National Party, the Apartheid-era ruling party that van Schalkwyk headed until he brokered a deal in 2004 to merge into the ruling African National Congress party, effectively dissolving the NNP) rather than elephants. Magome thought the Minister would orchestrate a way for the decision to be referred to Cabinet or Parliament for collective action. (Note: This is consistent with recent statements on elephant culling made by the Minister spokesperson, that he

Minister may want to convene a team of experts; he may want to consult other interested parties, the parliamentary select committee or Cabinet colleagues. There may not even be a decision by October; it depends on the process. nd note.)

Gag order imposed on SANParks

¶10. (C) Magome indicated that the Minister was extremely unhappy with Magome comments about culling because they generated controversy for him and his Department. He subsequently ordered Magome, the SANParks CEO Mavuso Msimang, and its chief Communications Officer not to speak to the media, Magome said. Magome also noted that he has survived past attempts by senior officials to have him fired for his forthrightness and candor. He mentioned an effort to discredit and fire him by the former Director-General for Environmental Affairs and Tourism that the former Minister (now IUCN President) Valli Moosa thwarted.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) Magome noted ironically that SANParks is a victim of its own success in managing wildlife and stamping out poaching. By speaking candidly about the need for the option of elephant culling, he has become the lightning rod for animal rights and wildlife activists opposed to the practice. If his candor costs him his job, it will be a loss to SANParks and national wildlife management.